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Cambodia: Why the Generals Won

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President Nixon's ground operations in Cambodia with US troops will likely be over, as he promises, by June 30, 1970. The long-range strategy by which the Cambodian adventure was undertaken almost certainly will not be. For though the invasion itself was unprecedented, all of the prior elements in the scenario were often repeated clichés, from the initial military overthrow of a popular leader by a right-wing pro-American clique, to the announced response to an enemy "invasion" at a time when the prospects for ending the war seemed to be increasing. Most characteristic of all is the likelihood that Nixon was pressured by the Joint Chiefs to authorize the Cambodian adventure in great haste, and in such a way as to bypass or overrule most of his civilian advisers, as a response to an "emergency" for which US intelligence agencies and perhaps the Joint Chiefs themselves were largely responsible.

Even if terminated by June 30, the Cambodian adventure has confirmed yet again what some of us have been saying for years: that at present the US military apparatus in Southeast Asia will work to reject a new policy of de-escalation as certainly as the human organism will work to reject a transplanted heart. The formula to neutralize this rejection process has unfortunately not yet been discovered.

In other words one cannot understand what has happened recently in Cambodia without understanding the whole history of the Second Indochina War. One cannot for example appreciate Lon Nol's expectations in overthrowing Prince Sihanouk on March 18 without recalling the anti-neutralist military coups of late 1960 and April 1964 in Laos, or of January 1964 and June 1965 in Saigon. US personnel were involved in (or at the very least, cognizant of) every one of these coups.

Each coup was followed by, and helped to facilitate, an escalation of the US military effort which the overthrown regime would not have tolerated. As my colleagues and I tried to demonstrate in our book, *The Politics of Escalation in Vietnam*, the result (if not the intention) of every one of these escalations was to nullify a real or apparent threat of peace at the time. (I would now add that we failed sufficiently to emphasize the role of our civilian and military intelligence services in bringing about all of the crises in question, as well as the present one.)

The second cliché of the scenario was Lon Nol's deliberate breach of the accommodation hitherto established between the NLF troops in Cambodia and the troops of Pnompenh, followed by a precipitous retreat, in the face of what seem to have been only light enemy probes, back to the outskirts of Pnompenh itself. This gratuitous provocation of a much stronger enemy has been treated as irrational by several well-established American analysts, but it will be seen to have its own Machiavellian logic when compared to similar events in the Second Indochina War. By the same combination of absurd provocation and precipitous withdrawal in previous springs, Laotian troops (and/or their American advisers) secured the first commitment of US combat troops to Thailand—the first in Southeast Asia, for that matter—in May 1962, and the first bombings of Laos—which *Aviation Week* correctly reported to be "the first US offensive military action since Korea"—in May 1964.²

Thus Lon Nol's actions, far from being irrational, followed a recipe for US support which by now has been tested many times and never known to fail. The exigent realities of the monsoon season and the US budgetary process encourage an annual cycle of escalation which by now can be not only analyzed but predicted.³

The third and most frightening cliché is the phenomenon of the artificially induced "crisis" used as a pretext for hasty executive actions which pre-empt the rights of Congress to declare wars and advise on foreign

policy. The military pressure on Nixon to escalate hastily in Cambodia recalls the pressure on Kennedy to escalate in 1962 and on Johnson to escalate in 1964, first in response to Laos and later in response to the alleged Tonkin Gulf "incident" of August 1964. In all cases, including the present one, a key role was played by our intelligence agencies, who first helped to induce a crisis which they subsequently misreported to the President.

Furthermore, all but the most rudimentary forms of civilian review within the executive branch were suppressed. When the first US arms shipment to Cambodia was announced on April 22 by White House press secretary Ronald Ziegler, his counterpart Robert McCloskey at the State Department admitted that he "knew nothing about it" (*New York Times*, April 24, 1970, p. 3). On April 23, the very day that "emergency" meetings of the Special Action Group began to consider the Fishhook invasion, Secretary of State Rogers told a House Appropriations subcommittee that if US troops went into Cambodia "our whole (Vietnamization) program is defeated," and that "we have no incentive to escalate into Cambodia" (*Washington Post*, May 6, 1970, A1). In the wake of the Fishhook decision ("Operation Prometheus") it was suggested that the Joint Chiefs of Staff had

... pulled an end run in their effort to get the attack against the border areas approved. ... Some believed Mr. Laird found himself in the final stages of planning for the invasion without being fully consulted and informed during the preliminary planning stages (*Christian Science Monitor*, May 14, 1970).

Perhaps the most embarrassing plight was that of Senate Republican leader Hugh Scott, who was

... cut adrift with White House-inspired statements that renewed bombing of the North was a remote contingency at the very time a hundred American planes were dropping bombs across the demilitarized zone.⁴

Constitutional procedures under Nixon, professedly a "strict constructionist," have clearly deteriorated a long way since 1954, when Dulles had

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